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AUTHOR Meagher, Eileen M.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the expectations of incoming University of Tennessee at Chattanooga freshmen about an hour-long placement essay. Subjects, 96 randomly chosen students, responded to a series of 5 questions concerning what an essay is, what kinds of writing they had done, how they feel about writing tests, what topics they had written about in English classes, and their attitude toward having to take the required placement exam. Results indicated that: (1) students were confused as to what constitutes an essay; (2) many students engaged in journal writing, but there seemed to be little connection between such informal writing and their formal assignments; and (3) students tended to perceive writing as testing or as second guessing the mind of the teacher. Findings suggest that there is room for improvement in the writing curriculum of some high schools, including: taking the writing process seriously; approaching writing about literature in a more student-oriented manner; making creative writing available to all students; and appointing a director or coordinator of writing across the curriculum in each school. (RS)

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Placement Examination: Writer's Expectations

4 C's, San Diego 1993

Dr. Eileen M. Meagher, UTC

Since 1981, at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where the majority of our students come from Tennessee and the northern sections of neighboring Southern states, we have been requiring all entering freshmen--approximately 1,000--to write an essay for placement purposes. These hour long placement essays are administered four times during the summer months to groups of students, groups ranging in size from 220-270. Each group assembles in the same large room in the University Center. There are usually 5-6 proctors and an announcer who gives all directions. As Director of the Writing Program from 1980-1992, I have made it my business to be present at these placement "exams" to ensure that all directions were being followed by the proctors, that the students had plenty of elbow room for writing, and to contribute as far as I could to a relaxed atmosphere. As I strolled around the room, students many times asked for clarifications; others looked up and smiled; and others seemed totally engrossed in their writing. Some finished writing in 15-20 minutes; others took the entire hour.

I also oversaw the reading of these essays by members of the English faculty, listened to their comments, and many times puzzled over whether a given student should be placed in one of our developmental courses or in some cases in an advanced writing Course. During these twelve years, I myself have read a cross section of these essays, a cross section numbering in the thousands. And like many readers of such essays, I have wondered about the students preparation for them, their expectations as they filed into that large room in the University Center, their reactions to the topic, to the room, to other students, to the proctors, and especially how they

CS213798

individually felt about taking the examination. (Parenthetically, I might say here that this placement process has worked very well. In the twelve years that I have administered the program, I doubt that I received as many as five queries about possible misplacement).

Last summer, a colleague, Dr. Kizza, the second member of this panel, and I decided to attempt to find the answers to some of the questions I listed above. Over the course of the summer, we interviewed in writing and in a relaxed atmosphere small numbers of students chosen at random immediately before they took the placement exam, and immediately afterwards. We planned to interview at least 80; we succeeded in interviewing 96. I will report on the students' responses to a series of five questions before they took the exam. Dr. Kizza will report on the responses following the exam. I asked the students to respond as fully and as honestly as they could to each of the following questions:

1. When you think of an essay, what comes to mind? In other words, what is an English essay?
2. How much writing have you done in the past? What kind of writing have you done?
3. How do you feel about writing tests? (I underlined the word "feel".)
4. What topics have you written about in English classes or in any other classes?
5. What is your attitude toward having to take the required university placement exam?

To the first question, "When you think of an essay, what comes to mind? In other words, what is an English essay?", the responses fell into three categories: 1. those that addressed content, 2. those that addressed length or structure, and 3. those that made an evaluative statement. Some of these categories overlapped.

As to content, fifteen said that an essay meant expressing their own thoughts and ideas; seven said expressing feelings; eleven said giving lots of facts; seven said providing a series of answers to questions; seven also said responding to an assigned topic; four said writing about literature covered in class; six said analyzing something; four said offering an opinion, six said writing correct grammar; two said making a report; three said telling a story; and the rest of the responses included writing description, writing an explanation, proving a point, regurgitating.

As to length and structure, fourteen spoke of a set number of paragraphs, usually five; fourteen also said an essay should be about a page in length; seven said writing something with a focus; two said the writing had to be very formal; and two said an essay was a lot of writing.

A number of students answered the question by offering an evaluative opinion. Four said an essay develops thought process and communications skills; four said it involves research; two said it requires knowledge; three said it is a test of creativity; four said it is something written under a time limit; four said it is a chance to impress the teacher with vocabulary: three said an essay is a test. Single negative responses included it is a complete headache; there are no real answers; it's about making up stuff; it is boring.

In response to the second question, "How much writing have you done in the past? What kinds of writing have you done?" students' answers fell into four categories: amount, where, kinds, and evaluative statements. Twenty-three reported that they wrote "a lot;" seventeen said, "not much;" and five reported "a fair amount." As to where they wrote, eighteen responded in English classes; eleven in the yearbook or school newspaper; six mentioned AP classes; four said English and History classes; four said History classes; two said English classes only; and there was one mention of each of the following disciplines: psychology, science, speech class,

art, music theory, and algebra.

About kinds of writing, thirty-four said term papers or research papers; eighteen said journal writing; fourteen said essays on literature; fifteen simply said essays; five said book reviews or reports; four said persuasive writing; two said critical thinking exercises; five said tests; three said autobiographies, and there was one mention of memos and thank you letters. Thirty three students mentioned poems and short stories, but the next category reveals much of this kind of writing was done outside of school. Twenty students chose to answer the question by separating academic writing from writing for the self. Ten said that they did academic writing only (only is an interesting word here), and ten made a point of stressing that they wrote poetry and some short stories for themselves outside of school. Only one student mentioned essay contests.

The responses to question three, "How do you feel about writing tests?" fell into three categories: affective statements both positive and negative, reasons for liking or disliking tests, judgments about tests. Surprisingly, the numbers of students who specifically stated they liked writing tests and the numbers who stated they didn't like them were about the same-- thirty-two liked them; thirty-five did not.

A number of students gave reasons for liking or disliking writing tests. Nine said that they preferred them to multiple choice tests; eight said they could explain themselves better in essay tests; four said that these tests allowed for greater objectivity; one said that essays do not demand hard facts; two simply stated they wanted them as tests; two said that in essay tests they could make up answers, and one said essay tests were okay if he could choose his own topic. On the negative side, four said time for organizing answers was a problem; two said essay tests were too subjective; three said they preferred factual tests with clear answers; two said essay tests allow for B.S.; three said they worried about spelling and grammar; one

said length was a problem; and another said he never felt prepared. Some students answered the question with positive judgments or statements about essay tests. Three simply said they were necessary; three others said they were important; two explained that these tests "are not just memorizing, they're learning;" two maintained that they were good for placing students; and two stated that essay tests showed one's intelligence better than do other tests. The negative judgments were, "they do not measure my ability" (two responses), "they should be coupled with simple knowledge questions" (two responses), "they are timed" (one response), and "they are arbitrary" (one response).

The answers to question four, "What topics have you written about in English class or in any other class?" were revealing. Fifty students said they wrote only or mostly about literature. Twenty-five said they wrote about people in history or historic events. Sixteen used the phrase "current events." Seven said "Health care." Nine mentioned research papers. Forty-one specified miscellaneous topics such as Voodoo, the homeless, Tennessee Aquarium, waste disposal, AIDS virus, and so on. Seven said they wrote what they were told to write about and really couldn't recall specifics, and nineteen other students variously mentioned creative essays, descriptions, narrations, humorous pieces, and personal experiences.

Finally, asked in Question 5, "What is your attitude toward having to take this required University placement exam?" the students responded quite positively. Forty said the essay test was beneficial for proper placement. Sixteen said it was a good idea. Twelve said it was a necessary evil. Seven said they had a positive attitude and were even excited about writing the essay. Two said it should be mandatory. Two more said it was important. Five said it didn't bother them. One said the placement exam showed whether or not high school grades are accurate reflections of students' abilities. And another added that it was better than a grammar test. On the negative

side, there were individual qualifications such as, "High school scores should be enough;" "It should be given closer to graduation from high school;" "It does not measure my true ability because it is timed;" "It makes me forget half of what I know;" "too much pressure;" "scares me;" "I don't really want to take it because I don't enjoy English."

So what can be learned about students' expectations of placement tests from their responses to these five questions? We can see that a significant number of students felt that they were expected to write five paragraphs--an introduction, three middle paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Structure was for them the most important goal of a successful essay. Another significant number felt that a successful essay was writing that filled up at least a page. Many were concerned about the possible topic and their felt need to supply definite, fixed answers or facts. These students understood an essay to be correct answers to a question or to a series of questions. Many students also saw the placement exam as a test of their knowledge, and of their grammar and spelling. Some saw it as simply "making up stuff" to fill a couple of pages, but all saw it as an attempt to please whoever was judging the essay. And this last factor was what caused many of the students anxiety. They were not sure just what would please this unknown judge. Nonetheless, practically all of them saw the exam as beneficial or necessary for placement purposes.

A close examination of the students' responses, however, does reveal much interesting and valuable information not directly related to their expectations of the placement examination. For example, one is immediately impressed with their ambivalence and/or misinformation as to what constitutes an essay. And when one examines the answers closely, it is clear that their writing history is the cause of their confusion. They wrote predominantly in English classes and mostly about literature. They wrote analyses of short stories, plays, and/or poems; they wrote book reports;

they did research papers on authors. They wrote these assignments to fulfill the expectations of teachers, to give teachers the information and facts teachers wanted. They saw these assignments as teacher oriented, as tests over material studied. They clearly did not see them as an avenue for imaginative exploration or expression. Some of the students referred to this kind of writing as regurgitation. The sole audience was the teacher and the teacher was God. Writing was a duty, a necessary academic evil; it provoked anxiety and had little to do with real life.

At the same time, many of these students engaged in a significant amount of journal writing and "free writes" as they called them, but there seemed to be little if any connection between such informal writing and their formal assignments. In other words, the informal writing did not appear to be academically functional; it did not feed into the preparation and drafting of formal writing assignments. The comments of students indicated that they saw journal writing and formal writing as two distinctly unrelated types of exercises. And with few exceptions, most of them devalued journal writing as B.S. or "making up stuff," or filling in time. This lack of a connection between informal and formal writing explains why so many of the students expressed concern about not having time to research the placement topic. In short, they were not practiced in invention and consequently were very low on invention strategies. The invention strategy most commonly used in the placement exams was the outline such as in "Think, make an outline, write." A small few did do something akin to clustering.

A few students mentioned writing narratives, persuasive pieces, explanations, and personal experiences, but one gets the definite impression that the term essay for most of the students covers a multitude of types of writing. It can be any of the aforementioned; it can also be a short story; it can be a report; it can even be a term paper. Hence, to at least some extent, their varied approaches to the placement exam and their extremely varied performance on it.

It was also interesting to note from the responses to the questions that students who expressed confidence about their writing, did not fear writing, or even enjoyed writing fell into three categories: those who wrote for the school newspaper and for the yearbook, those who took creative writing classes, and those who wrote for themselves outside of school. In general, little if any anxiety was expressed by these students. Some who wrote for the school newspaper mentioned specific stories they had written and the satisfaction such writing gave them. Writing for them was not just a duty; it had a meaningful purpose and was close to the human life world they inhabited. They saw writing as an instrument of power and their own writing enhanced their self esteem. Those who took creative writing classes spoke proudly of their short stories and poems. They clearly felt that they were doing something considered unusual and that they were a cut above the everyday student writer. More importantly though, one felt that they enjoyed these classes and achieved a measure of success in them. Unlike journal writing, creative writing was about real writing and counted for something. Those who wrote for themselves outside of school saw a world of difference between academic writing and writing for themselves. Academic writing had nothing much to do with life and was not, therefore, interesting or engaging. It was a duty that had to be done to achieve a grade and it had to be done to accommodate the interests of the teacher. Writing for the self, on the other hand, was meaningful and pleasurable. These students reported that they kept personal journals; some wrote plays, and some wrote poems. One student commented that even though he suspected his poems weren't great, they nonetheless gave him much pleasure.

A third piece of information emerges from the responses to the five questions. The writing across the curriculum movement which has been around a long time now has barely touched many high schools. As mentioned earlier, students reported that they wrote predominantly in English classes. A significant number did say that they

also wrote essays and research papers in history classes but writing in history classes may always have been expected of students. Of note, though, is the fact that writing in such subjects as biology, art, physics, psychology, speech, music, and algebra was mentioned at least once for each discipline. (One student reported that all her exams in every subject were of the essay type.) We can conclude, then, that with the exception of history, there is only a token attempt at incorporating writing to enhance learning across the disciplines in the high schools from which these students came. This surely explains why our freshmen at the University rebel against having to write in any discipline other than English.

Finally, it is clear from these 480 responses from 96 entering freshmen that there was something amiss in their writing instruction. Their confusion as to what constitutes an essay, the divorce of journal writing from formal assignments, the students' tendency to perceive writing as testing or as second guessing the mind of the teacher, and the tendency of the majority of them to regard writing as school "stuff" rather than "life" stuff suggest that there is more than ample room for improvement in the writing curriculum of some high schools.

I propose that such improvement might include the following:

1. that the writing process be taken seriously by those in charge of curriculum (we at the college may need to help),
2. that the approach to writing about literature be more student oriented than teacher oriented,
3. that writing in all classes be made functional and meaningful to the lives of students,
4. that creative writing classes be available to all students, and
5. that there be a director or coordinator of writing across the curriculum in each school to bring faculty together to discuss and compare the need for writing across the curriculum.